



At sea: A signature Arctic species, the walrus, is under growing threat from summer fragmentation of sea ice. (Photo: Daniel Cox/Photolibrary.)

most of the year kept prospectors at bay, there was little to regulate.

But as global warming thaws the ocean's layers, oil giants, shipping companies and even the odd enterprising tourist operator are casting their eyes towards the high north.

The biggest boom could be in oil and gas. The US Geological Survey surprised some experts when it declared that a quarter of the world's undiscovered reserves lay under the Arctic Ocean. As the ice retreats, oil companies are scrambling to open a new frontier.

Attempts to open up the Arctic national wildlife refuge in Alaska to drilling remain deadlocked in the US Congress, but several companies have dipped more than a toe in the chilly Arctic Ocean further north. BP Amoco is developing an Alaskan offshore oil deposit called Northstar and Statoil is working on a gas field 90 miles across the Barents Sea from its most northerly outpost, Hammerfest. Called Snow White, the project is expected to start pumping liquefied natural gas to the US and Europe next year.

Environmental campaigners are viewing the creeping development of the Arctic with mounting concern. Norway announced last month that it will limit drilling in some areas to protect

fragile ecosystems. The 31-mile exclusion zone in the Barents Sea has large supplies of fish. But the embargo expires in 2010 and drilling elsewhere is being stepped up, with the granting of 13 gas and oil licences to 17 companies.

Stephanie Tumore, a climate campaigner with Greenpeace, said: "Haven't we learnt anything? Why are we going looking for more fossil fuels when what's happening in the polar regions just proves that it is devastating and we cannot continue to do that."

The present energy crisis results from a sharp rise in consumption that has outrun a tightening supply,

writes Peter Canby in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*. "Most of the oil in the United States is used for fueling the cars and trucks that have been almost entirely responsible for the growth in demand over the last few decades."

Now, 1,000 square miles of Arctic tundra on Alaska's North Slope is home to one of the world's largest industrial complexes, with 28 oil production plants, 4,800 exploration and production wells, 1,800 miles of pipes and 500 miles of roads. The spread of this sort of development around the Arctic raises many new fears.

A flap over bird flu

Mediawatch: Bernard Dixon looks at the differing Scottish and English newspaper responses to the first confirmed case of H5N1 bird flu in the UK.

April 7 was the day that brought public confirmation that a dead swan found in a Scottish fishing village had succumbed to the H5N1 avian influenza virus. The strain had emerged originally among chickens in China and the far East and had spread to and killed some of their handlers. After reaching various parts of mainland Europe, the virus had now arrived in Britain in the wake of growing concern over its capacity to ravage the country's poultry industry. An even greater anxiety was that mutation or recombination might equip the agent for person-to-person transmission and thus spawn a lethal pandemic.

So was media coverage on that critical day marked by sensational headlines and panicky hyperbole? Scientists prone to blame journalists for offences of this sort would do well to reflect on what actually happened. In fact, a snapshot of the day's newspaper columns revealed much level-headed writing. Both 'up-market' and more popular titles sought to provide authoritative facts about the significance of the finding, and for the most part did so

very competently. Some of the most impressive efforts to avoid over-reaction were in the Scottish newspapers, nearest to the scene of the discovery, rather than in those published in London.

Eschewing the sort of headlines brandished by two especially colourful London-based papers, *The Scotsman's* front page read: "Bird flu — Answers to the key questions...Leading experts assess the human threat and give practical advice." This was followed by eight pages on every aspect of the story. In addition to local coverage of the situation in Cellardyke, Fife, where the swan was found, there were detailed accounts of the measures taken in the entire at-risk area and the reasoning behind them. A sober chronology of the detection of the H5N1 virus in various countries since its initial appearance in China in 1997 was coupled with an explanation by virologist John Oxford of the low risk to human health.

There was cool coverage too in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, under the page one banner "UK's united front to fight bird flu scare". Again, the paper presented a comprehensive dossier of well-informed material, ranging from wildlife issues to the pros, cons and feasibility of vaccination for both chickens and humans. The only fevered note was a report of an attack by the Scottish parliament's environment minister

on a supermarket chain for announcing that it did not stock poultry from Scotland, implying that this might be unsafe to eat.

The Edinburgh edition of the free daily, *Metro*, struck a note of caution with its page one "Don't panic". It contained an admirably compact account of the natural evolution of influenza viruses. Another article steered a careful path in arguing that, while the danger to human health was remote, people should be vigilant in looking for and reporting any further wild birds.

The only screaming headline north of the border was the *Scottish Sun's* "Bird flu threat to T" — T being shorthand for a pop and rock music festival called T In The Park. Scheduled to take place in Balado in Kinross-shire, it was in jeopardy because the site was next to a giant poultry farm. Aside from this important matter, however, sobriety reigned. "One swan's death from bird flu

is a matter for concern, but not alarm," said an editorial. "Humans have been infected only where they live in unhygienic proximity to livestock — and there has been no leap from human to human... Experts refuse to panic. And so should we."

Meanwhile, down in London, the *Daily Mail* splashed "Bird flu: It is the killer strain" on its front page, followed by bullet points signalled with red danger boxes: "Anger at delays in reaction to emergency...14 other birds being tested for deadly virus..." Inside, though the delay had become a "Deadly delay", four pages of background were presented sanely and objectively. There was sensible practical advice about everything from the virus ("To catch it humans need to have close physical contact with the bird's blood or have inhaled particles from its faeces") to the danger to pets ("Domestic animals such as cats and dogs are at risk

because they are likely to come into contact with dead birds").

The Independent provided comprehensive briefing notes along the lines of those appearing elsewhere. However, in contrast to all other newspapers, which highlighted one specific aspect of the scenario, it placed them on page one under the heading "Bird flu: What it really means". Criticising the apocalyptic tone of much media reporting in the weeks before the identification of the Cellardyke swan, the paper demonstrated its calm by compressing coverage into just three pages — less than any other title.

Indeed, *The Independent* can be criticised for going too far in trying to allay its readers' anxieties. This produced a questionable reassurance about the possible transfer of H5N1 to humans, and perhaps undue optimism as to how effectively any newly arrived flu virus might be eliminated from the UK. "It is rare for an animal virus to cross the species barrier and infect humans," its editorial ran. "The task for our health authorities is to ensure that this unwelcome guest has as short a stay on these islands as possible".

For several newspapers, the key issue was not the virulence of H5N1 or the spectre of a human epidemic but the practical measures taken to block dissemination. *The Daily Telegraph* opened with "Britain's first bird flu zone" and *The Times* with "Exclusion zone for killer bird flu virus". The former advised readers to "remain calm and not be afraid to eat chicken tonight", while the latter advocated "sober planning rather than frenzied overreaction".

Consistent with the (surprising?) coolness shown by the majority of journalists and editors, one conspicuous feature of April 7 was a total absence of articles written by columnists who are ever-ready to launch into print with strong opinions about anything whatever. Just for once, we can be appreciative for the pieces that did *not* appear.

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Don't panic

BY MIKE TAIT

A HUGE exclusion zone was set up in Scotland last night after it was confirmed a swan had tested positive for deadly H5N1 bird flu.

Chief Medical Officer Dr Harry Burns said the chances of humans catching avian flu was "extremely low" unless someone had been in close contact with the affected bird.

He added: "That does not appear to be the case here."

The mute swan was found last Tuesday on a harbour slipway in the coastal village of Cellardyke in Fife. It is believed to have caught the virus from a wild bird.

In Scotland, 12 other swans and two other species of birds were also tested for the virus.

Glasgow was put on full alert after two dead swans were found in Richmond Park. The birds were sent for tests but within hours scientists said it was likely they died from other causes.

Chief Veterinary Officer Charles Milne said yesterday the 2,500-kilometre "wild bird risk area" was set up to the east of the M90 motorway, from as far north as Stonehaven to the Forth Road Bridge in the south.

The area contains more than three million poultry, which must now be kept indoors to stop them coming into contact with wild birds.

Rural Affairs Minister Ross Finnie said vaccination of domestic birds was not an option.

He added: "The advice I have is that it is not a method for successfully eradicating this disease should it break out in our poultry flock."

Prime Minister Tony Blair yesterday urged the public not to panic.

He said: "It is very important that people understand this is not a human-to-human virus, it is something that is transmitted to poultry. It is only if humans are in direct and very intensive contact with poultry that there is any risk involved."

Blue terror: The H5N1 strain of the avian flu virus captured using an electron microscope (Photo: AP/Wide World)

Delay worry - Pages 4 & 5

Calming: One Edinburgh newspaper was keen to reassure people about the discovery of a single dead swan in eastern Scotland carrying the H5N1 bird flu virus strain.

Bernard Dixon is the European editor of the American Society for Microbiology.